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MOUNTAIN MARATHON

Running a marathon is still generally considered as a race more or less on the flat. But more and more athletes are now going for the mountain marathons.

In 1997 when Jean Claude Pont, a natif of Zinal (Wallis) and professor of philosophy at the University of Geneva, decided to promote a race from Sierre to Zinal, he was considered as totally crazy. However, he managed to get together 400 athletes prepared to take up the challenge: 31 km uphill with a height difference of over 2000m. The race does not follow the main road up the Val d'Anniviers, but uses walking tracks, mountain paths, open terrain and river beds. So the running is much tougher than on the direct route up the valley.

Today over 3000 participants turn up for this yearly event. The absolute record stands at 2 hours and 33 minutes.

For years, the classic marathon in Switzerland was the Murten to Fribourg

race which attracted up to 14,000 participants. Now only 9,000 come along as many are looking for more challenging races.

But the Sierre-Zinal marathon has already been exceeded by much longer races:

- The Jungfrau Marathon from Interlaken to the Kleine Scheidegg: 40km, record time 3 hours.

- The Muverans Marathon, 60km over 6 mountain passes with a total height difference of over 4650m. Record time 7 hours and 22 minutes.

- The Val-de-Travers Marathon of 70km, height difference 2000m which is starting this year (departure will be at 5.00am with arrivals expected towards 7.00pm).

Davos replied to these challenges with its own Swiss Alpine Marathon, 67km with a height difference of 2300m.

These races have become so popular that every holiday resort wants to have its

own. There are just not enough weekends during summer to accommodate all these races and so, on some weekends, there are up to 6 different races to choose from.

And what do these athletes get for their participation? Very little in comparison with their efforts and the hours of training required: SFR 800 for the winner of Sierre-Zinal, SFR 5000 for the winner of the Jungfrau Marathon and a Piaget watch worth some SFR 8000 for the winner of the Val-de-Travers race. Subsequent placings in these races are rewarded with very little apart from a certificate and a few small presents from the race sponsors.

Where will it all end? Ultra marathons that will last several days, races that will go even higher up into the mountains where the air is thinner which will put even more strain on the participants' lungs. Sooner or later there will be accidents and possibly deaths through sheer exhaustion.

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TAXIDERMIST "EXTRAORDINAIRE"

"I live in a mythical world" says Christian Schneider who, as a taxidermist, has already stuffed over 1200 animals.

At the age of 16 he started an apprenticeship in Fribourg where he learnt how to stuff dead animals to make them look as natural as if they were alive.

At the age of 20, he returned to his home in Vicques near Délémont (Jura) where he worked at his trade like a madman. Today his whole farmhouse is full of animals. Most of them come from zoos but others were brought to him after they had been killed on the roads or by poachers.

Schneider's biggest hobby at the present is to recreate the world famous animal fables of the French poet Jean de la Fontaine.

Christian Schneider at his home surrounded by hundreds of his beloved animals. There is only one live animal amongst them all in this picture. Can you identify it? It is Christian's border-collie Yari sitting by his feet.